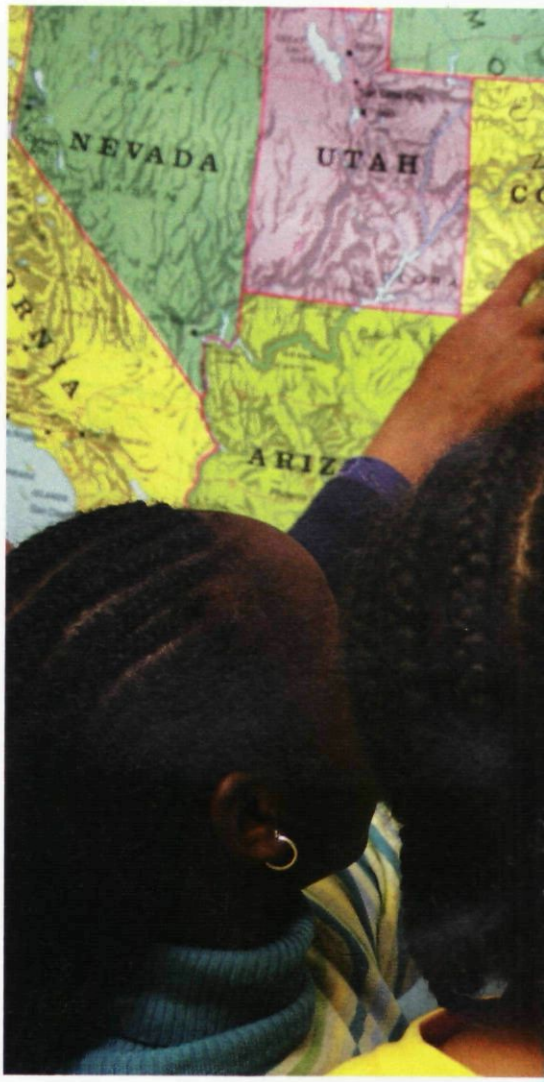
Mapping the Road to Proficiency



A table of specifications provides a travel guide to help teachers move students toward mastery of standards.

Thomas R. Guskey

When the standards movement began in the United States more than 15 years ago, most educators welcomed the idea. The enthusiasm that greeted the first set of clearly articulated student learning goals, published by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989, led other professional organizations to follow suit. During the next decade, the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Academy of Sciences, and the National Council of Teachers of English all developed standards in their respective disciplines. States also took up the task, with Kentucky leading the way in 1990. Today, 49 of the 50 states have established standards for student learning.

Thoughtfully constructed standards guide education reform initiatives by providing consensus about what students should learn and what skills they should acquire. Standards also bring much-needed focus to curriculum development efforts and provide the impetus for fashioning new forms of student assessment.

But to bring about significant improvement in education, we must link standards to what takes place in classrooms. For that to happen, teachers need to do two important things: (1) translate the standards into specific classroom experiences that facilitate student learning and (2) ensure that classroom assessments effectively measure that learning (Guskey, 1999).

Some states, school districts, and commercial publishers have developed teaching guides that identify instructional materials and classroom activities to help teachers meet the first challenge. Rarely, however, do teachers get help in meeting the second challenge—developing classroom assessments that not only address standards accurately, but also help identify instructional weaknesses and diagnose individual student learning problems.

Translating Standards into Instruction and Assessments

Large-scale assessments provide evidence of students' proficiency with regard to the standards developed by states and professional organizations. These assessments are well suited to measure the final results of instruction and, thus, to serve the purposes of summative evaluation and accountability.

But teachers cannot be concerned only with final results. Their primary concern lies in the process of helping students reach proficiency. Large-scale assessments just don't offer teachers